

Washington State Comprehensive Tolling Study: Summary of Ascertainment Interviews

An early-action element of this study was to interview community leaders and interest group representatives from all areas of the state, to gain a sense of their perspective on tolling in Washington. Although these do not represent a statistically valid sample of Washingtonians, they do provide some insight into the issues that should be considered in this policy study. The following is a brief summary of the highlights of those interviews.

What was most important to interviewees?

Safety. The transportation system has been ignored for a couple of decades, making some roads and bridges downright dangerous—especially vulnerable in a seismic event.

Economy. An efficient transportation system and the ability to move product to market is critical to the economy and future of the state; the need to accelerate projects through toll financing should consider these economic factors.

Congestion Relief. Congestion has worsened considerably, with travelers in the Puget Sound area most affected by delays on a regular basis.

Fairness is important. Tolling the Tacoma Narrows Bridge is acceptable, but there was not a bigger context of tolling to reassure Kitsap Peninsula residents that other areas would also have tolled projects. As a result, most interviewees identified fairness as important in implementing tolling in all areas of the state.

Congestion management is inherently fair. Most interviewees who were familiar with the concept of congestion management thought it is a fair way to add capacity to existing roads. They believe it is a low-cost, practical way to fix existing roads—and it represents a choice. Those who were unfamiliar with congestion management had a harder time imagining how it would work, but liked the idea if it could show itself to work in certain environments.

Tolling is the way of the future. Tolling is inevitable—and has been the tradition for funding bridge construction in Washington. There is no other way to build what we need.

Acceptance of tolling among the general public will take time. The state should do some pilot projects first. Many interviewees consider the Tacoma Narrows Bridge and SR 167 as defacto demonstration projects.

What projects are conducive to tolling?

Interviewees indicated that bridges are natural—they have traditionally been tolled and it may be the only way to pay for them. Projects with a clear need and conditions that make tolling practical were mentioned. Interviewees were not in favor of tolling an entire road, but did like the idea of HOT lanes, where drivers had a choice. Projects that add capacity or relieve congestion should be the priority. Some projects that received frequent mentions were:

- SR 520 and I-90 bridges (These were mentioned sometimes separately and sometimes together—with SR 520 mentioned most frequently because of more urgent safety issues. Some interviewees thought a toll would have to be placed on both bridges to avoid congestion on one or the other.)
- SR 167 HOT lanes
- I-5 through Seattle (problem of Convention Center was mentioned by several interviewees)
- I-405 for its entire length
- I-90 additional capacity from Lake Washington across Snoqualmie Pass
- Columbia River bridges
- A new north-south corridor through eastern Puget Sound linking Kent and Everett, possibly as a Truck-Only Toll (TOT) project.

Issues

The following issues were raised by interviewees and reflect personal views and opinions. While they do not reflect the views of everyone who was interviewed, they should be considered to see if they carry any weight with the public. They are listed in order of frequency of mention by interviewees.

Parallel Facilities. A dilemma exists between the belief that an alternative is needed for those who don't want to use a toll facility, but also the need to toll parallel facilities (as in 520 and 90 bridges) to avoid "toll avoidance" impacts on the toll-free alternative. Important to this discussion was the need to offer choices to travelers.

Captive Audience. The "captive audience" dilemma is a desirable condition for tolling, but also lends itself to the outcry of unfairness for the same reason that makes it desirable. In the view of some, Vancouver, Washington faces the same potential dilemma as Kitsap Peninsula if bridge improvements toll both the I-5 and I-205 bridges. This would affect the 60,000+ people who commute daily across the river from Vancouver to jobs in Portland, Oregon.

Impact of RTIDs. If Regional Transportation Investment Districts (RTIDs) receive tolling authority, some people foresee the possibility of the RTIDs becoming the preferred source of funding for local projects wherever they are created. The fear is that if they were to be created in the more populous counties of the state (which are the only places they are seen as feasible), then we could see the development of a series of fiefdoms that help themselves, with no one willing to pay for statewide improvements. This could leave the less populated rural areas without transportation funding.

Communications. Communicating with the public about tolling is important. Not only is there an information void about how modern toll-collection systems work, there is little knowledge about tolling for congestion management purposes. The comprehensive tolling study is a good vehicle to use to initiate a discussion tolling in all its forms. The Tacoma Narrows Bridge and SR 167 projects are viewed as good test cases from which people can learn the practical side of how tolling works.

Overall Need for Transportation Improvements. Communicating the need for transportation improvements in general is also important. Many interviewees understood the

importance of goods movement to the state's economy and to the future transportation system, and they believe that raising awareness about the importance of the economy and goods movement to the State of Washington is an important rationale for explaining why we need tolling. If we don't pay to improve the transportation system, Washington will simply lose business to competing states and countries.

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